

The Legacy of Jephthah's Daughter:
Chastity, Sacrifice, and Feminine Complaint in
Chaucer's *Franklin's* and *Physician's* Tales

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"Thanne yif me leyser, fader myn," quod she.

"My deeth for to compleyne a litel space";

For pardee, Jepte yaf his doghter grace

For to compleyne, er he hir slow, allas!

Chaucer, *Physician's Tale*¹

VIRGINIA ALLUDES to the biblical tale of Jephthah's daughter as she comes to terms with her own impending death in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*. By adding this brief biblical reference, as Sandra Pierson Prior contends, Chaucer characterizes his revision of the story of Virginius and Virginia not as a moral tale about justice or virginity but as the tale of "a daughter sacrificed by her father."² This reference to a father's sacrifice of his daughter, however, does not simply link Virginia to her unfortunate biblical counterpart; Virginia's allusion also emphasizes the connection between Virginia and Dorigen, the central figure of the *Franklin's Tale* and another female character who needs to "compleyne a litel space" about a fate she cannot control. Dorigen and Virginia are united by their positions as objects of male-sanctioned sacrifice. Like Jephthah's daughter, both of these female characters mourn their fates knowing that they are powerless to change them. Likewise, they become victims of violence, either physically or psychologically, at the hands of men who ostensibly care for them. For each character, the moment of feminine complaint provides her only freedom from confinement within social situations that endorse the violent subjugation of women. However fleeting, this moment of complaint allows both characters to free themselves from the binds of patriarchal power structures.

Dorigen and Virginia, like many of Chaucer's women, exist within a context of socially accepted gendered violence. Although this violent

backdrop is at times questioned or corrected, as Angela Jane Weisl has argued, it is more frequently ignored or mitigated.³ It is this background of violence that compels both Dorigen and Virginia to contemplate two brutal fates: death or dishonor. Both characters see death as the only way to avoid the shame of unwanted sexual contact outside of marriage. For these women, then, violence perpetrated by the men in their lives is inescapable. This violence facing Dorigen and Virginia reflects the cultural climate of medieval England in which the violence enacted upon a woman's physical body could serve as a means to maintain masculine dominion. This power structure, one rife with the threat of violent subjugation, is embodied and enforced by the literature of the time as both tales discussed in this essay illustrate. While Chaucer may offer some space for feminine speech within these tales, that space necessarily exists within the confinement of masculine discourse and society.

Within the male-dominated cultures represented in these tales, women are treated as objects of exchange used as a means of improving relations between men, especially within the aristocracy. Their value as commodities, however, depends upon public perception of their purity.⁴ Political and commercial interests are inextricably bound to notions of female chastity because of the political and economic importance of heir production. As chaste wife and virginal daughter, Dorigen and Virginia are vital components in the continuation of patrilineal society. From this economic perception of chastity, a raped woman, just like an adulterous one, is dangerous, damaged property because she could be impregnated by an outsider. The implications of female chastity thus extend beyond the individual into the realm of the public and political, and as such, it becomes a site of public contestation and passions. As Michael Uebel has put it, a "Chaucerian understanding of the violence producing virginity and chastity as collective passions entails an acute attention to the public contexts in which virginity functions, or fails to function."⁵ Chastity, both for the unwed virgin and for the pious wife, is something that the community, as well as the individual, must protect by whatever means necessary.

The value of female chastity extends beyond the importance of heir production; it also takes on ritualistic value through its connection to sacrifice. For the medieval community, chastity—virginity, in

particular—is framed “within an economy of sacrifice.”⁶ Uebel’s language here underscores the relationship between medieval female sexuality and commerce while also calling attention to another significant aspect of the tales. Not only is female chastity important for economic relationships within medieval communities, it is also inextricably linked to communal well-being. The cultural tradition of sacrifice prizes virginity because it allows for what Prior describes as the “killing and/or offering up a perfect victim.”⁷ Because of her physical purity, the virgin is this “perfect victim,” one whose sacrifice will restore an unbalanced community. Once again, we see that through the notion of the virgin sacrifice, virginity remains bound up within a net of violence. As René Girard discusses in *Violence and the Sacred*, sacrifice allows a community to control the violent tendencies of the group by means of sacred ritual; it “can be defined in terms of maleficent violence polarized by the victim and metamorphosed by his death into beneficent violence.”⁸ The death of a single victim appeases the aggressive appetites of the community at large. Sacrifice thus serves as an act of community restoration. Interestingly, though, the very subjugation that creates this need for sacrifice, the model of an unchaste woman as a worthless one, also creates the opportunity for both Dorigen and Virginia to escape that model and assert themselves with their complaints.

We see sacrifice of two types at work in the *Franklin’s* and *Physician’s Tales*. In the *Franklin’s Tale*, Dorigen finds that her husband, Arveragus, is willing to sacrifice her desire to remain chaste, offering her up for sexual dishonor at the hands of Aurelius, in order to prove his *gentillesse*. This private sacrifice disregards Arveragus and Dorigen’s so-called egalitarian marriage putting Arveragus’s desire for *gentillesse* above his wife’s desires and honor. Although sending his wife to another man goes against the logic of heir production in patrilineal society, Arveragus’s willingness to sacrifice Dorigen’s chastity underscores the idea that as his wife, she is his property. In the *Physician’s Tale*, that Virginia is her father’s property goes without question; even her name demonstrates her position as merely a part of her father. In Virginius’s violence to his daughter, we find a ritual sacrifice working according to Girard’s explanation. The virgin sacrifice of Virginia ostensibly saves her from sexual dishonor and ultimately works to restore order to Roman

society. Moreover, Virginia's direct "evocation of the story of Jephthah's daughter" calls attention "to a virgin's place in a patriarchal culture and also to her potential role as a sacrificial victim."⁹ Through her brief reference to Jephthah and his daughter, Virginia temporarily brings the feminine to the foreground in a story otherwise dominated by male power relations.

Virginia's final request to her father refers to the story of the Gileadite Jephthah found in the book of Judges. Jephthah prays to God for victory over the Ammonites, offering up as a sacrifice "whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph." Unfortunately, it is his unnamed daughter, an only child, who first comes to greet him upon his victorious return. Jephthah grieves this turn of events, crying to his daughter, "*You* have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break." Jephthah's language here attempts to minimize his own responsibility while simultaneously assigning blame to his innocent daughter for his pain. His daughter accepts this blame willingly; however, she makes one request: "'Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request,' she said. 'Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.'"¹⁰ For these two months, Jephthah's daughter mourns her fate, but ultimately, she returns to become the object of her father's sacrifice.

Importantly, the biblical tale stresses that Jephthah's daughter mourns not because she must die, but because she will die unmarried. In his analysis of the poetics of virginity in the *Physician's Tale*, Howard Bloch examines the works of Church Fathers like Augustine and Jerome who define a virgin not simply as a woman who has never had sex with a man, but as one who has never had the desire to do so. According to this strict patristic definition of virginity, Jephthah's daughter herself, in mourning that she will die a virgin, is no longer a true virgin. Moreover, Bloch asserts, "according to the Patristic totalizing scheme of desire, there can be no difference between the state of desiring and being desired;" therefore, a true virgin is a woman who has never desired nor been desired by a man.¹¹ In this totalizing scheme, Virginia, the chaste object of Apius's desire, joins both Dorigen and Jephthah's daughter in the ranks of "impure" women. All three women are thus doomed because of sexual

desire, whether that desire is their own or someone else's.

Jephthah's daughter is linked to Dorigen by her desire for marriage, but also in her need to complain, to lament her situation. Dorigen is a woman trapped by her own language and ultimately confined within a system of patriarchal morality and *gentillesse*.¹² The language that confines her, however, is also her only means for a moment of freedom. For, as Mary Bowman suggests, the one freedom that "Dorigen is allowed is the ability to express her grief," which we see in two moments of complaint.¹³ Dorigen despairs over the jagged black rocks that threaten her husband's safe return in her first complaint, praying to God that they be sent to hell in lines 865 to 894. In her second extended complaint, found in lines 1355 through 1456, Dorigen mourns the feminine choice between death and dishonor, a choice she faces after Aurelius appears to have made the dangerous black rocks disappear. Critics question the effectiveness of Dorigen's narration, accusing Dorigen, as well as Chaucer himself, of "rambling and incoherent speech" characterized by "hasty writing" that suggests Chaucer's lack of interest in the material.¹⁴ Even those critics who defend Dorigen's lament concede its dullness. One such critic, Anne Thompson Lee, says that "the biggest problem" with Dorigen's lament is "its utter dreariness."¹⁵ Regardless of its dreariness, though, this extended complaint bears further scrutiny.

Several critics have gone to extreme lengths to understand the complaint's rhetorical significance. Gerald Morgan examines the complaint as a rhetorical device, breaking it into three sections according to subject matter, whereas Warren Smith divides it into two equal sections of eleven exempla each.¹⁶ More important than the structure of the complaint, however, is its function within the tale. By taking this time alone to complain her choice, Dorigen, like Jephthah's daughter, has the chance to exist, however briefly, outside the male-dominated society that ultimately silences her. In this moment of freedom, she uses the language of masculine discourse to create a feminine narrative space, borrowing the language of men's literature to speak her own grief.¹⁷

Dorigen's second complaint is a retelling of the first book of St. Jerome's *Against Jovinianus*, which deals with the chastity of pagan women and is arguably the tale's most identifiable source.¹⁸ As Smith puts it, though, Dorigen's sympathetic revision attempts to correct

Jerome's stern rhetoric not only through what she chooses to omit, but also through her own additions and emotional asides.¹⁹ Her first example, of the thirty tyrants' wickedness, begins the sympathetic corrective that will characterize all of her exempla:

Whan thritty tirauntz, ful of cursednesse,
Hadde slayn Phidon in Atthenes ate feste,
They commanded his doghtres for t'areste,
And bryngen hem biforn hem in despit,
Al naked, to fulfille hir foul delit,
And in hir fadres blood they made hem daunce
Upon the pavement, *God yeve hem meschaunce!*
For which *thise woful maydens, ful of drede,*
Rather than they wolde lese hir maydenhede,
They prively been stirt into a welle,
And dreynthe hemselves, as the bookes telle.²⁰

Whereas her precursor, Jerome, upholds these martyred women for their chastity without any expression of outrage or emotion, Dorigen both grieves for the maidens' torment and condemns their captors as tyrants "ful of cursednesse." Dorigen's ability (or willingness) to sympathize with these pagan victims and to hold their tormentors in blatant contempt separates her narration from the sterile *Against Jovinianus*. Moreover, as Bowman notes, in this complaint, Dorigen provides her own reading of the source text, imposing her own interpretations of the stories and thereby demonstrating an "ability to take what the male literary tradition makes available to her and then modify it for her own use; her reading of the exempla gives expression to her reading of her world."²¹ In other words, through Dorigen's complaint, we see her emotions and concerns, including those that she attempts to hide from both Arveragus and Aurelius.

This complaint is not simply a sympathetic retelling of Jerome's stories. It also functions as a feminine response to the commodification of women that occurs in nation formation, warfare, and in the tale's local competition over masculine *gentillesse*. For while the Franklin takes pains to claim that Arveragus and Dorigen's marriage is one of partnership rather than "maistrye," the end of the tale works to cancel out this

notion by turning Dorigen into a prize for the man who exhibits the greatest *gentillesse*. Dorigen is reduced to an object of exchange between her husband and the lovesick Aurelius, one with no power to choose in the matter of Aurelius's sexual claims.²² Dorigen's objectification at the tale's end thus presents in miniature the large-scale commodification of chaste women in the Middle Ages.

As we see with the story of Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale*, for the aristocracy, marriage is the trade of women as a type of international currency; chaste women are thus commodities with which nations barter for religious, economic, or political prowess.²³ Dorigen's lament, however, shows another sort of commodification, one in which women, such as the thirty tyrants' maiden victims, become part of the spoils of war. For example, she speaks of Hasdrubal's wife "That at Cartage birafte himself hir lyf" rather than have "any Romain [do] hire vileynye."²⁴ Likewise, she commends the seven virgins of Miletus who commit suicide "Rather than folk of Gawle hem sholde oppresse."²⁵ In these examples, we see military invasions from a perspective not found in the grand, masculine histories of warfare—that of the female "property" taken after the battles end.²⁶ The chaste women of these exempla refuse to become property, choosing to commit suicide rather than to become the spoils of war. In this respect, they become the agents of their own destruction, making the choice to end their lives instead of becoming the property of foreign men. However, in taking their own lives, these women preserve their chastity, the virtue that gives them value within male-dominated society. Even the act of ultimate self-sacrifice keeps these women confined within male-dominated social structures that elevate female virginity above life itself.

Joseph Parry argues that through this complaint, Dorigen carves out a narrative space that provides temporary freedom from "the male structures" of the tale.²⁷ Just as Scheherazade draws out her narrative as a means of self-preservation in *1001 Nights*, Dorigen comically expands her complaint "a day or tweye," thus deferring the choice—death or dishonor—that connects her to the women in her stories.²⁸ The very act of narration becomes a stay of execution, a "way to perpetuate her life as a character" of her own tale.²⁹ This narrative liberty, however, is short-lived. As Kathryn Lynch suggests, ultimately "Dorigen makes a

complaint that leads nowhere except back to the male discourse of the husband, the suitor, the clerk, and the Franklin.”³⁰ Dorigen’s complaint marks the pinnacle of her narrative freedom. Once she shares her dilemma with Arveragus and receives his absolution, she is silenced. Dorigen’s female speech is eliminated by and replaced with male speech. Specifically, she is silenced by Arveragus’s threat against her life:

“I yow forbade, up peyne of deeth,
That nevere, while thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,
To no wight telle thou of this aventure,—
As I may best, I wol my wo endure,—
Ne make no contenance of hevynesse,
That folk of yow may demen harm or gesse.”³¹

This command works against two earlier passages in the tale in such a way that it underscores Dorigen’s utter subjugation to her husband’s desires. First, it soundly negates the Franklin’s opening comments about the couple’s marriage, showing instead the sort of mastery that was denounced earlier—here, Arveragus commands and expects his wife to obey. Likewise, in forbidding Dorigen not only to tell this story, but even to show her distress, he puts an end to the temporary liberation she experiences through narrating her complaint. That Arveragus’s chief concern as he silences Dorigen, sending her against her will to commit adultery, is enduring his own “wo” is the ultimate indictment of their so-called egalitarian marriage.

Dorigen speaks only once more after her confession to Arveragus, but does so, as Lynch notes, in a broken syntax quite unlike her earlier lament:

And she answered, half as she were mad,
“Unto the gardyn, as myn housbande bad,
My trouthe for to holde, allas! allas!”³²

Dorigen thus goes from making laments that perhaps go longer than they should to speaking “half as she were mad,” and ultimately, she is left in utter silence. Even in this final, broken speech, however, Dorigen maintains a semblance of narrative freedom. Although Arveragus has demanded that she keep both her story and her emotions to herself, her

speech to Aurelius reveals both. Dorigen tells her misguided suitor that she is there at her husband's behest, and the repetition of her plaintive "allas!" emphasizes her distress at her predicament. Bowman astutely points out that in their final meeting at the garden, Aurelius no longer addresses himself to Dorigen. Instead, his words "are addressed . . . to Arveragus *through* her."³³ However, the squire's ultimate act of sympathy is a response to Dorigen's lamentation, a "contentance of hevynesse" visible even in the face of her husband's earlier threats. Despite this rather pathetic final display of subjectivity, Dorigen becomes a messenger, a tool through which Aurelius and Arveragus show *gentillesse*. She is no longer allowed to narrate the stories of women who attempt to resist commodification; instead, she has been transformed into a commodity herself. Thus, the narrative freedom of her complaint is ultimately subsumed within the masculine power exchange of *gentillesse*.

Dorigen's complaint provides temporary freedom and power within the constraints of patriarchal society; it enables her to carve out a narrative space that allows for a sympathetic, feminine revision of Jerome's *Against Jovinianus*. Her complaint, however, only allows Dorigen a brief glimpse of that freedom before it is removed and her voice silenced. Both female speech and the notion of an egalitarian marriage are removed from the tale's conclusion. This moment of complaint, however, does more than provide narrative freedom; as Weisl notes, it also underscores the "background of violence" against which the stories of women in *Canterbury Tales* are told. While Dorigen suffers no physical violence within the tale, her complaints remind us that the danger of this violence is ever-present for medieval women. By contextualizing her own fate in a literary litany of gendered violence, Dorigen imagines herself within a tradition of gendered violence and "of the threat of rape, death, and dishonor" that accompanies the patriarchal structures that commodify women.³⁴ Although she survives with both her life and her chastity intact, Dorigen is left as a silenced commodity in a masculine quest for the greatest *gentillesse*.

In the *Physician's Tale*, Virginius makes concrete for his daughter the choice that Dorigen defers during her extended complaint. Whereas Dorigen only contemplates death as a way to avoid shame, Virginia is murdered to prevent her sexual dishonor. Like Dorigen though, Virginia

is silenced in the masculine power struggle between her father and the judge, Apius. Virginia, the virginal object of Apius's desire, becomes her father's sacrificial victim. Virginius seeks to punish Apius for his lust not by direct action against the corrupt judge, but instead by eliminating the target of his lust, "by disposing of his daughter's sexuality."³⁵ Virginia is therefore sentenced to death by her own father and suffers the ultimate punishment for being the unwitting object of Apius's lust. As a number of critics have pointed out, Chaucer makes an incestuous pun by having Virginius decapitate his daughter. He removes the *maiden's head*, which prevents Apius from taking her *maidenhead*.³⁶ Either action, however, is an act of violence against Virginia. Thus, although Virginius's sacrifice saves her from Apius's lust, Virginia, not Apius, remains the immediate victim of her father's sexualized violence.

While many scholars have examined this tale's emphasis on justice, recent feminist criticism has turned its focus from the contention between Virginius and Apius toward Virginia's role within the text, both as sacrificial victim and as an agent in her own demise. These critics, including Weisl, Prior, Linda Lomperis, and Robin Bott, argue that the ramifications of Virginia's murder extend far beyond the notion of justice between men of power. In fact, the "question of justice—good or bad—has been implicitly laid aside by Virginius and is never mentioned by Virginia, who moves instead into the mode of sacrifice."³⁷ Looking at the *Physician's Tale* as a story of sacrificial infanticide brings Virginia to the forefront even though the text itself confines and silences her.

Chaucer's story of Virginius and Virginia is a retelling of Livy's history, as the Physician himself notes, but it also calls on Jean de Meun's thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*. Notably, in his version of the tale, Chaucer allows Virginia to speak, something absent in both of his sources. Prior argues that by "making us hear and see for the first time an actual human child, with a voice, Chaucer's additions to the received story of Virginia heighten the drama and involve us in the sacrifice."³⁸ Upon learning of her choice between "death or shame," Virginia tearfully questions her fate, asking her father if there is no other option for her:

"Goode fader, shal I dye?
Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?"³⁹

Despite his daughter's plaintive speech, however, Virginius remains fixed in his plan. Chaucer's addition of Virginia's voice does nothing but emphasize the tragic futility of her position. She speaks only after Virginius has made his decision about her death. She can do nothing to change her predicament; her sentence has been handed down before she has a chance to speak on her own behalf. Virginius decides her fate; all Virginia can do is submit to what he has decided. Ultimately, the voice Chaucer gives to Virginia can only be used to mourn her death.

In addition to giving Virginia a voice, Chaucer moves the public conflict between Virginius and Apius into a private, domestic space. As both Lomperis and Bott have noted, Chaucer's tale shifts Virginia's murder from the public space of the courtroom into the privacy of Virginius's home. "By mixing the public and private in this manner," Lomperis argues, "Chaucer's writing not only effectively politicizes the domestic space; it also makes public—indeed, it publicizes—what Virginius does in private, focusing attention especially on the speech Virginius delivers to his daughter before he actually beheads her."⁴⁰ Moreover, Chaucer takes a crime of passion and translates it into an act of premeditation. Not only does Virginius have time to plan his actions, he takes time to announce his intentions to his daughter:

"O gemme of chastitee, in pacience
Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence."⁴¹

Although he seems to present her with a choice, albeit a limited one, Virginius makes that choice for her.⁴²

Chaucer underscores the falseness of this choice through Virginia's speech. In asking if there is "no remedye"—if there is no other option—Virginia calls attention to the limited scope of Virginius's dichotomy.⁴³ The falseness of Virginius's staunch justice is further emphasized in his own language toward his daughter:

"For nevere thou deservedest wherfore
To dyen with a swerd or with a knyf.
O deere doghter, *endere of my lyf*,
Which I have fostred up with swich pleausance
That thou were nevere out of my remembraunce!"⁴⁴

Ironically, Virginius falsely condemns his daughter as “the endere of my life” shortly before he ends hers. He remains alive at the tale’s conclusion, and her death is subsumed within the male power relations of the community. Likewise, although he tells Virginia that she does not deserve to die by sword or knife, Virginius proceeds to kill her and immediately present her decapitated head to Apius:

Hir heed of smoot and by the top it hente,
And to the juge he gan it to presente.⁴⁵

The idea that this infanticide is an act of mercy toward Virginia wavers when we see that Virginius moves from murdering his daughter to spitting Apius within the space of a rhyming couplet. The power relations between these two men take precedence over Virginia’s threatened chastity—indeed, over her life itself. Virginius’s actions thus seem motivated not by a desire to protect his daughter, but by a desire to maintain his power within the masculine structures of Roman society.

Regardless of Virginius’s motives, as Lianna Farber has argued, we cannot discount Virginia’s voice in this exchange. She suggests that the most remarkable aspect of Chaucer’s tale is that Virginia agrees with her father’s decision that she must die.⁴⁶ Farber’s analysis, however, overlooks Virginius’s sentencing of his daughter. In urging her to “Take thou thy deeth,” Virginius turns the initial choice—“outher deeth or shame”—into a death sentence.⁴⁷ She must “take” her death; there is no longer an alternative for Virginia to choose. Since her father presents her with no real choice, all that is left for Virginia to do is accept the fate he has decided for her. She does this by asking “for to compleyne a litel space” about her death and alluding to the tale of Jephthah and his daughter.⁴⁸ In having Virginia recall this particular tale, in which the father’s religious bargaining determines his daughter’s fate, Chaucer opens a space wherein we can read Virginia’s speech as a condemnation of her father’s action:

“Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame;
Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!”⁴⁹

Although Virginia does welcome her death over the possibility of shame, ostensibly embracing Virginius’s flawed logic, the final line of this passage

emphasizes that her death comes at Virginius's will, not her own. Her final words—"Dooth with youre child youre wyl"—underscore that this is his choice; she accepts that she is his daughter, an object under his control, and therefore, she must submit to his will.

After Virginia's death, the community rallies to protect Virginius from being hanged for the murder. Through this action, they rid themselves of Apius's corruption and restore order to the community. Virginius's killing of Virginia thus takes on the characteristics of ritual sacrifice; Virginia's death brings about the reassertion of an aristocratic hierarchy in which Virginius is once again empowered over corrupt legal men like Apius. The effects of her death, along with the political language of the tale, thus encourage us to view the tale as political allegory. Virginia comes to represent the community as a whole precisely because she lacks a real choice in her fate:

The young woman, whom all recognize as having little power over the fate of her own body, is in this case the proper allegorical embodiment of men, who, Chaucer seems to say, do not have so much power as they think they do, especially when they agree with those who hold real power over them. The question for them, as for Virginia, is one of what creates their agreement.⁵⁰

In this respect, then, the physical violence enacted on Virginia's body represents the political violence at work on the community itself. As Bott and other critics have argued, during the medieval period comparing the workings of society to those of a physical body was commonplace, as was the metaphorical linkage of social operations to the functions of the literal body. Therefore, the dismembering of Virginia's literal, physical body functions "to symbolize and contain anxieties about social stability."⁵¹ With corrupt figures like Apius at the head of the body politic, the Rome of the tale is unstable, in a state of crisis. On a political level, then, Virginius's infanticidal action is symbolic of the aristocracy's attempt to restore social order. Virginia's headless body represents the community that rallies around Virginius, saving him from Apius's sentencing while simultaneously reinforcing the aristocratic status quo that keeps them politically silent.

Such allegorical readings of the *Physician's Tale* translate this "cruel

and unjustified murder” into a “legitimate model for emulation.”⁵² Reading Virginia’s story allegorically, however, distances us from the physical violence enacted upon her, violence that threatens women throughout the *Canterbury Tales* and in other medieval texts. By adding Virginia’s voice to his version of her story, Chaucer adds another critical layer to this allegorical violence. The most remarkable aspect of Chaucer’s rereading of Virginia’s story is not that she agrees with her father’s course of action, but that, insofar as she is able to, she does not. Virginia accepts her fate as inevitable, taking on the mantle of sacrificial virgin in a power struggle that gives more value to her death than to her life. However, Chaucer gives her voice so that she may complain and, in doing so, indict both her father’s actions and the social order that Virginius represents.

The violent specter of patriarchal power informs the action of both the *Physician’s* and *Franklin’s Tales* and leaves the central female figures of both texts silenced. Both characters are pushed into the role of sacrificial victim by the men who control them, and in each case, this sacrifice functions to restore social stability. Arveragus’s willingness to sacrifice his wife’s chastity leads Aurelius to take back his claim on Dorigen; Virginius’s infanticide is the catalyst for events that remove the corrupt Apius from authority. Like the community at large, Dorigen and Virginia have no control over their fates. What each character does have, though, is a chance for complaint, a moment to speak that remains sharply contained within the male social structures of each tale. Ultimately, like Jephthah’s ill-fated daughter, Dorigen and Virginia are left with a “litel space” in which they are able to lament their fates and, for that moment, break the patriarchal power structures that bind them.

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END NOTES

1. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Physician’s Tale*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. A. C. Cawley and Malcolm Andrew (London: Everyman, 2004), 6.237–41. All subsequent references are to this edition.

2. Sandra Pierson Prior, “Virginity and Sacrifice in Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale*,” in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 165.

3. Angela Jane Weisl, "'Quiting' Eve: Violence against Women in the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. Anna Roberts (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 117.
4. Robin L. Bott, "'O, Keep Me from Their Worse Than Killing Lust': Ideologies of Rape and Mutilation in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*. ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 190.
5. Michael Uebel, "Public Fantasy and the Logic of Sacrifice in the *Physician's Tale*," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 31.
6. Ibid.
7. Prior, "Virginité and Sacrifice," 168.
8. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 258.
9. Prior, "Virginité and Sacrifice," 168.
10. Judges 11:31-37 (New International Version, my emphasis).
11. Howard R. Bloch, "Chaucer's Maiden's Head: *The Physician's Tale* and the Poetics of Virginité," *Representations* 28 (Autumn 1989): 116.
12. She is trapped by her own language because Aurelius interprets what she says "in pley" as pledging her troth, that when he makes the coast "clene / Of rokkes" she will "love yow best of any man" (5.989, 995-97).
13. Mary R. Bowman, "'Half as She Were Mad': Dorigen in the Male World of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 27, no. 3 (1993): 248.
14. Germaine Dempster, "Chaucer at Work on the Complaint in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Modern Language Notes* 52 (1937): 22.
15. Anne Thompson Lee, "'A Woman True and Fair': Chaucer's Portrayal of Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 19, no. 2 (1984): 174.
16. Gerald Morgan, "Boccaccio's 'Filocolo' and the Moral Argument of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 20, no. 4 (1986): 285-314. Warren S. Smith, "Dorigen's Lament and the Resolution of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 36, no. 4 (2002): 388. For more thorough explorations of the complaint's structural significance, see either of these critics.
17. Expressing her distinctly feminine position through an appropriation of traditionally masculine discourse demonstrates how complaint allows Dorigen to, as Bowman describes it, "occupy two positions at once: a passive figure in a male-dominated world and a speaking subject with an identity of her own" (243-44).

18. As Gerald Morgan notes, Boccaccio's *Il Filocolo* is another probable source for the tale (285). Likewise, Kathryn Lynch makes a compelling argument for *1001 Arabian Nights* as another source text. "East Meets West in Chaucer's *Squire's* and *Franklin's Tales*," *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 70, no. 3 (1995): 530-51.

19. Smith, "Dorigen's Lament," 376.

20. Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, 6.1368-1378 (my emphasis).

21. Bowman, "Dorigen in the Male World," 248.

22. *Ibid.*, 241.

23. Carolyn Dinshaw examines Custance's marriage as "the trade of a woman," a literary representation of Levi-Strauss's analysis of marriage in which "the exchange of women is the very mechanism of kinship systems." *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 96.

24. Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, 5.1399-1404.

25. *Ibid.*, 5.1409-1411.

26. Think of *The Iliad* as told from the perspective of Chryseis or Briseis.

27. Joseph Parry, "Dorigen, Narration, and Coming Home in the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 30, no. 3 (1996): 273.

28. Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, 5.1457.

29. Parry, "Dorigen, Narration," 279.

30. Lynch, "East Meets West," 550.

31. Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, 5.1481-85.

32. Lynch, "East Meets West," 549; Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, 5.1511-13.

33. Bowman, "Dorigen in the Male World," 241.

34. Weisl, "Quiting Eve," 122.

35. John A. Pitcher, "Chaucer's Wolf: Exemplary Violence in *The Physician's Tale*," *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 36, no. 1-2 (2003): 22.

36. For more detailed analyses of this pun, see Bloch, "Chaucer's Maiden's Head," or Linda Lomperis, "Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices: Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* as Socially Symbolic Act," in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 21-37.

37. Prior, "Virginity and Sacrifice," 169.

38. *Ibid.*, 172.

39. Chaucer, *Physician's Tale*, 6.214; 6.235-36.

40. Lomperis, "Unruly Bodies," 30.

41. Chaucer, *Physician's Tale*, 6.223-24. Note also that this passage emphasizes Virginia's position as her father's valuable property—the

language conflates chastity and commerce by casting Virginia as a “gemme of chastitee.”

42. Angus Fletcher claims that Virginia “submits to her father to avoid the judgment of Apius, but clearly this is not a real choice. Whether she chooses death or shame, she has lost the right to pen her own sentence.” “The Sentencing of Virginia in the *Physician’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 34, no. 3 (2000): 306. I would push his idea further, though, to suggest that Virginia has no choice in this situation. She must submit to her father’s will because choosing shame is not a “real choice.”

43. Chaucer, *Physician’s Tale*, 6.236.

44. *Ibid.*, 6.216-20 (my emphasis).

45. *Ibid.*, 6.256-57.

46. Lianna Farber, “The Creation of Consent in the *Physician’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 159.

47. Chaucer, *Physician’s Tale*, 6.224; 6.214.

48. *Ibid.*, 6.239.

49. *Ibid.*, 6.247-50.

50. Farber, “Creation of Consent,” 161.

51. Bott, “Ideologies of Rape,” 192.

52. Pitcher, “Chaucer’s Wolf,” 24.